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ABSTRACT

Certain settings and activities can be initiated in the classroom to encourage reluctant writers to write. The classroom environment should be structured so that writing efforts produce positive reinforcement. Sharing ideas with peers or the teacher prior to writing will enable students to feel that their ideas are worthwhile. Children can be paired with more proficient writers to observe them writing. Teacher feedback to reluctant writers must be immediate as well as nonthreatening. The teacher should allow the children opportunities to see that she is engaging in the process of writing, and should actively involve the children in decisions concerning her written pieces. Reading their products aloud to self and others provides a sense of ownership. Children must be given adequate time to write in a risk-taking environment. The teacher must be sensitive to what is going on with the child. Activities to encourage writing include having the children dictate stories about pictures and having the teacher record them, having the teacher and child take turns in writing conversations, and writing pen pal letters. Evaluation of the child's writing development may be conducted by collecting writing samples over a period of time and discussing writing efforts in conferences. (JDD)

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Encouraging Reluctant Writers in the Classroom

by Barbara Tyler

Educators recognize that young children learn to write by writing (Beers and Beers,1981; Goodman and Goodman.1978; Graves,1978.) Research has provided information regarding the importance of an accepting environment for writing. When all classroom situations invite children to write and provide freedom to write in various forms, what is to be done with the child who is so reluctant to put pen to paper for writing to occur? Primary teachers observe reluctant writing behavior in the classroom. A child will become teary-eyed during writing experiences or will sit in their desk while staring at a blank piece of paper. Breaking pencil lead, erasing marks on paper until a hole appears in the paper, or pealing paper off a crayon appear to be necessary diversions for reluctant writers. Frank Smith(1982) stated the only difference between a writer and a non-writer is that the writer writes. How do teachers become the force which encourages the non-writer to write? As with so many educational problems, there is no easy answer. However, there are certain settings and activities that can be initiated in the classroom to make it almost impossible to avoid writing.

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The environment should be structured so that writing efforts produce positive reinforcement. Sharing ideas with peers or the teacher prior to the writing act will enable students to feel comfortable that their ideas are worthwhile. Informal discussions among students often lead reluctant writers into writing. For those students that are reluctant to attempt to write word on the paper, drawing a picture and discussing the picture with others leads students into understanding that

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communication exists in various forms. Once the student has drawn a picture that communicates an idea that he/she can discuss, the student is often more willing to write their words under the picture.

Morrow (1989) states that children learn about writing by observing more skilled others and by participating with them in literacy events. Within a classroom, children can be paired with more proficient writers to observe them writing and the processes they encounter during writing. Pairing students during writing allows for informal discussion during writing. Informal discussion provide opportunities for students to write and talk about their thoughts as they are actually recording the words on paper. The informal discussion also allows a student to hear their thoughts and receive feedback on the thoughts before the words are recorded. Thoughts can be refined and extended through informal discussions during writing. The environment must provide successful non-threatening experiences and opportunities for reluctant writers to take risks.

Teacher feedback to a reluctant writer must be non-threatening. If a writer receives a returned paper marked with red pencils and critical remarks the likelihood that the child will risk an incorrectly spelled word or improperly arranged sentence is reduced. As children take risks they begin to learn about writing. A supportive atmosphere is a conducive learning environment in which a child can experiment with written language. As children begin using their knowledge of print, it is the efforts of respect and appreciation for the product that convinces children that they can write. Allowing children to read their work from an author's chair demonstrates their messages can be received and appreciated by others.

The teacher must serve as a model for classroom writing. She must allow the children the opportunities to see that she is engaging in the process of writing. The teacher must demonstrate the behavior which she expects of the children in the classroom. The teacher can actively involve the children in decisions concerning her written pieces. A child that offers help to the teacher is more willing to attempt the writing of his own work and be willing to accept helpful suggestions regarding revisions and editing. The child who sees the teacher writing, sharing, and then rewriting will be more willing to duplicate the behavior.

TEACHER OBSERVER:

The teacher must be sensitive to what is going on with the child. Often a child will make an attempt at writing and then totally withdraw from the experience in the future episodes. The first assumption to be made is the child has received negative feed-back concerning the writing product. Perhaps the child was told he did not spell correctly, or an adult may comment on not being able to read every word. The child might recognize on his own that his words do not look the same as those in text and the letters may not be formed the same. Irregardless of the reason for the reluctance, the teacher must recognize that it exists and actively work to help the student overcome the reluctance to write. The first and most vital aspect of dealing with students that are not willing to write is for the teacher to accept manuscripts with mistakes and reward the thoughts involved in the writing. It is vital for the teacher to continue encouraging the writer in every attempt he makes at the writing process.

In a child centered classroom given many opportunities to write, young Greg would sit reluctantly and only put pen to paper when he could

copy printed text. When Greg was instructed to write in his story journal, answer a pen pal letter, or write for real purposes, he would go through the motion of beginning the task. As soon as the teacher left the students to work independently, Greg would place his paper in his desk and focus his attention on any activity to avoid the writing task. Being observed closely, Greg pulled a paper out of his desk in which he had written the word *DEAR* and responded:

G: "Do you know why I don't write?"

T: "No, why don't you write?"

G: "I don't know how to spell all of those words."

T: "What are you suppose to do when you don't know how to a word?

G: "Well, I could ask someone."

T: "What else could you do?"

G: "I could try and take a risk."

T: "Fine Greg, now I would like for you to take a risk."

G: "O.K., I will take a risk if you help me."

T: "Let's try it together. You write and I will sit here, that way if you really need my help, I'll be here."

G: "O.K., but you sit right here." (pointing to his side of the desk)

Once Greg was willing to take a risk and put pen to paper and know his thoughts were encouraged and appreciated, he began to think of himself as a writer. In future attempts at writing, Greg attempted the task with energy and willingness to communicate through writing. The teacher was a vital force in communicating and encouraging the writing process. The teacher was willing to support Greg and provide a risk taking environment for him.

TEACHER FEEDBACK

Teacher feedback to a reluctant writer must be immediate as well as non-threatening. For beginning writers, the teacher must give total approval of the efforts involved in the writing process. The teacher must convey this message with her voice as well as facial expressions. Body language is as powerful as verbal approval.

If a writer receives a returned paper marked with red pencil and critical remarks, he is likely to view his attempt at writing as a failure and refuse to try the next writing assignment. A child will take a risk only if he is sure that his efforts will be well received. As children take risks, they begin to learn about writing. A supportive atmosphere and a positive teacher attitude produce an environment conducive to learning in which the child can experiement with written language.

In order for children to conceive their messages are received, the teacher should allow them to read the written passage aloud. Reading the product aloud to self and others provides a sense of ownership. The child should be encouraged to read the message to himself first and then read it to a peer. The child can also be encouraged to read the message to the teacher. To reinforce the appreciation of the product, the teacher can read the child's work and provide positive comments regarding the thought processes involved in the process. In some cases, the teacher should allow the child to read the message aloud first so the teacher can decipher the message.

TIME TO WRITE

Greg received positive feedback from the teacher on his writing and was not pressured to write;but, equally important, he was in a classroom that provided a risk taking environment. The atmosphere of the classroom

encouraged Greg to freely talk about his thoughts. He was allowed to discuss events with his peers and the teacher before he attempted to write. It is important for the reluctant writer to have a chance to discuss experiences as a pre-writing activity.

The basis for writing is experience which is accomplished by discussion (Licktieg, 1981). Discussion serves as a motivation and an organizer for one's thoughts. It also serves as giving a purpose to writing. Reluctant writers must have many opportunities to feel the purpose for writing. Writing is not to be confused with penmanship practice. Writing is a natural language event in which transferring meaning is the purpose. Most authorities believe that growth and development in writing does not occur because of teacher instruction but through experiences with writing (Licktieg, 1981). Children must be given time to write. Children should not be rushed into collecting thoughts, putting them down and then dismissing the manuscript so as to move on to another task. Ample time in the classroom must be provided for children to hear information, think about ideas, talk with significant others about the ideas and information, and record their thoughts on paper. After thoughts are recorded in the form of writing, students must be given time to read their written pieces, reorganize thoughts, add or delete information to the piece, re-arrange words and correct errors. Sharing the writing product by reading to a peer is a reinforcing experience, especially for a reluctant writer. Children need few incentives for writing when the atmosphere is supportive and they have been encouraged to take risks and interact with peers.

The classroom environment must allow for interaction between students. A classroom in which children are free to talk about their writing and seek help from one another encourages students to share.

When children help each other, competition is not a factor, and children support one anothers' efforts. The children should be given the opportunity to move about the classroom freely and interact with peers about their written work. Peer interaction is not only helpful to the author, but also helpful to the listener. When listening to a story written by a friend, a child may get ideas from the message that will help in his/her own writing. An atmosphere in which children feel free to share and take a risk is one in which a child can progress at his own rate, and the learning is progressive and continuous.

ACTIVITIES

LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE:

Language experience is a starting point for young writers. One of the first steps for "would be" writers is to see writing modeled and to recognize that they do have ideas important enough to put in print. Clay (1977) explains how captioned pictures get younger children on their way to writing. The teacher adds captions and sentences to pictures the children have drawn and to photographs of themselves as they are involved in classroom activities. The teacher accepts a dictated story from the child and records it under the picture. The child may attempt to trace or copy the story, and these efforts are reinforced by the teacher's acceptance. This activity could lead to the production of an enlarged book which may be introduced to the children as reading material. This material reflects students' interests and experiences. Language experience is of proven value in the classroom; however, there are unlimited possibilities for developing writing activities derived from children's experiences and language.

WRITTEN CONVERSATIONS:

Written conversation (Burke, 1978) is a way to entice students into writing. The teacher and the child take their turn writing responses to one another and read the responses aloud as the production occurs. Written conversation is an activity which gives the writer a purpose and audience for writing. It can serve as a strong motivational activity for reluctant writers. Short conversations that are familiar and of interest to the child will make writing seem almost impossible to avoid.

PEN PAL LETTERS:

Pen pal activities can provide incentive and a purpose for writing. The pen pal does not necessarily need to be in the traditional sense. Parents, another teacher or adult, or the classroom across the hall may be involved in the exchange of letters, or letters may be exchanged between students and teacher in the same classroom. Greg's classroom was involved in writing pen pal letters to a college education class at a near-by university. Greg was encouraged by his pen pals to write by the questions they asked. Greg discovered that if he wrote more than one letter, he would receive more than one letter. When the college pen pals responded to contents of his letters they received, he became aware that his letters were a means of communication; they could be read by others, and they had meaning. Receiving letters motivated Greg to write. The more he wrote the less concerned he showed to correctness of spelling.

Writing pen pal letters in the classroom in extremely motivational and serves as a purpose to write. Letter writing episodes can be enhanced by providing real or homemade envelopes for the children to mail their letters. Positive reinforcement for letter writing may be built in when children can write for free and inexpensive materials that can be utilized

in classroom activities.

EVALUATION:

One way to monitor a child's writing development is to collect writing samples over a period of time. Underlining or marking mistakes in red ink accomplishes very little, while discussing writing efforts with the writer through conferences lead to constructive improvements. These conferences need not center on mechanics but should involve thoughts and ideas the child is expressing in his writing. Collecting writing samples will serve as a diagnostic means to determine the type of help a child needs in writing.

Writing samples collected over a period of time and placed in a portfolio will serve as a basis for parent conferences. The teacher may use the samples as documentation for discussion with the parent. Developmental and growth patterns are evident when samples are viewed over a period of time.

Not every child will become a published author, but every child can become functional and enjoy communicating through writing when given the proper encouragement. Children must be provided the opportunity to learn to communicate through writing. There will always be those children who find writing demanding, but there are activities a teacher can provide all children to encourage the act of writing. Teachers must provide children opportunities in the classroom to allow the writing process to be as comfortable as possible. As teachers provide risk-taking environments, motivating activities, supportative attitudes, and evaluation based on improving communication abilities, reluctant writers will feel more confident to express their ideas through written communication.

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